National Park System Advisory Board

Citizen advisors chartered by Congress to help the National Park Service care for special places saved by the American people so that all may experience our heritage.

A Short History

The National Park System Advisory Board, originally titled the Advisory Board on National Parks, Historic Sites, Buildings, and Monuments, was established by the Historic Sites Act of 1935. The act specified that it would consist of not more than eleven persons, "to include representatives competent in the fields of history, archaeology, architecture, and human geography," serving without fixed terms at the pleasure of the Secretary of the Interior. They were to advise on any park-related matters submitted by the Secretary for their consideration, and they were authorized to "recommend policies . . . pertaining to national parks and to the restoration, reconstruction, conservation, and general administration of historic and archaeological sites, buildings, and properties."

Following the Federal Advisory Committee Act of 1972, which sought to regularize the many such bodies that had materialized over the years, Congress reformed the Board in 1976. Now called the National Park System Advisory Board, it would still have up to eleven members, including "representatives competent in the fields of history, archaeology, architecture, and natural science," appointed by the Secretary for terms of up to four years. The Secretary was directed to consider nominations from professional, civic, and educational societies and institutions. The Board's purview still included but was no longer limited to matters submitted by the Secretary. In accordance with a new policy against open-ended boards, the law set January 1, 1990, as its termination date.

The changes were small but significant. The original Board was conceived primarily to support the major new historic preservation programs of the National Park Service authorized by the Historic Sites Act, and most of the early professional appointees represented cultural resource disciplines. The 1976 enactment substituted "natural science" for "human geography" and more clearly provided for lay members outside the specified disciplines. Greater public involvement was invited by the requirement that the Secretary consider nominations from outside groups, both professional and nonprofessional, and by other requirements that Board meetings be publicized and open. Six-year terms for Board members had been administratively imposed in 1950, so the four-year term set by law in 1976 was the second step taken to increase membership turnover. Secretary William P. Clark took a third step to this effect in 1985 by abolishing the administratively created Council of the Board. The Council consisted of former Board members who could no longer vote but could still attend and participate in meetings, expenses paid. Some of the most influential members had remained active on the Council for many years, adding knowledge and continuity to the Board's deliberations.

In 1990 Congress reauthorized the National Park System Advisory Board until January 1, 1995. In so doing it increased the Board's membership to sixteen, required appointees to "have a demonstrated commitment to the National Park System," and replaced the "natural science" field with "anthropology, biology, geology, and related disciplines." It required the Board to

"provide recommendations on the designation of national historic landmarks and national natural landmarks," which the Board had customarily done, and "strongly encouraged [it] to consult with the major scholarly and professional organizations in the appropriate disciplines in making such recommendations." Congress also revived what Secretary Clark had abolished by legally establishing the National Park Service Advisory Council, comprising twelve former Board members, to provide advice to the Board.

When Congress failed to reauthorize the Board upon its expiration in 1995, Secretary Bruce Babbitt administratively reestablished it until December 6, 1997. His charter for the Board reduced its membership to twelve and established additional professional and experience requirements for appointees. Congress continued this membership number and most of these requirements when it legally reauthorized the Board in the Omnibus Parks and Public Lands Management Act of 1996 [PL 104-333] until January 1, 2006.

This latest authorization, which became effective December 7, 1997, defined the Board's purpose as "to advise the Director of the National Park Service on matters relating to the National Park Service, the National Park System, and programs administered by the National Park Service." Appointed by the Secretary to staggered four-year terms, members must have "demonstrated commitment to the mission of the National Park Service." The law specified the Board's composition in unprecedented detail:

> Board members shall be selected to represent various geographic regions, including each of the administrative regions of the National Park Service. At least 6 of the members shall have outstanding expertise in 1 or more of the following fields: history, archeology, anthropology, historical or landscape architecture, biology, ecology, geology, marine science, or social science. At least 4 of the members shall have outstanding expertise and prior experience in the management of national or State parks or protected areas, or natural or cultural resources management. The remaining members shall have outstanding expertise in 1 or more of the areas described above or in another professional or scientific discipline, such as financial management, recreation use management, land use planning or business management, important to the mission of the National Park Service. At least 1 individual shall be a locally elected official from an area adjacent to a park.

Other new provisions in the 1996 law includedan appropriation authorization of $200,000 per year for Board expenses and an authorization to hire two full-time staffers to serve the Board. The only specific task previously assigned the Board by law remains as such: it must provide recommendations on national landmark nominations. The National Park Service Advisory Council also continues.

How has the Advisory Board performed in practice? Like any advisory group whose power is limited to persuasion, the Board's influence has depended heavily upon the caliber of its membership and its usefulness to those it serves. With a few exceptions chosen for "political" reasons, the early appointees were foremost figures in their fields. Herbert E. Bolton of the University of California was among the leading historians of his time. Waldo G. Leland organized the American Council of Learned Societies. Col. Richard Lieber was the dynamic founder and leader of Indiana's park system. Hermon C. Bumpus had headed the American

Museum of Natural History, and Clark Wissler was a prominent anthropologist there. Fiske Kimball, director of the Philadelphia Museum of Art, was the preeminent architectural historian of the day. Wissler and Kimball played major roles in shaping NPS historic preservation policies during the 1930s.

Many later appointees were equally renowned in their fields. Among them were anthropologists John Otis Brew, Emil Haury, and Loren Eiseley; historians Theodore Blegen, Bernard De Voto, Wallace Stegner, and Robin Winks; architect Nathaniel Owings; and scientists Starker Leopold and Stanley Cain. Some board members had national reputations in other areas, including the publisher Alfred A. Knopf; Horace M. Albright, former NPS director and conservationist; John Oaks, editorial page editor of *The New York Times*; Robert Sproul, former president of the University of California; Melville Grosvenor and Melvin Payne, presidents of the National Geographic Society; astronaut Wally Schirra; and Lady Bird Johnson (after she left the White House). Five former U.S. senators and representatives who had been active in park affairs also served.

During the three decades following World War II, when the National Park System underwent major expansion, the Board made some of its most important contributions. All park proposals came to the Board for its recommendations, which regularly went to Congress with the recommendations of the NPS. While not necessarily decisive, the Board's views carried weight with the congressional committees. The Board supported many park proposals, and its opposition sometimes helped derail proposals for parks not meeting national significance criteria.

After the mid-1970s the Board lost some of its former luster. Its prestige suffered from the appointment of fewer well-known leaders from both within and outside the professional disciplines. The 1976 law that allowed the Board to consider matters not brought to it by the Secretary may have made secretaries reluctant to appoint heavyweights who could challenge their policies. During the early 1980s the NPS opposed most new park proposals and stopped bringing them to the Board, thereby depriving it of one of its primary functions. With fewer Board members possessing solid park-related credentials, Service leaders were less inclined to seek the Board's advice on management policies and other issues that once had been routinely presented to it, if only for expected rubber-stamp approval.

The rise of numerous other vehicles for public involvement in Park Service planning and decision-making surely diminished the Board's importance and purpose. Originally it was the Service's primary official source of outside expertise and input. This was no longer the case by the 1970s, when NPS regions and many parks had their own advisory committees and such laws as the National Historic Preservation Act and the National Environmental Policy Act required outside review of most significant NPS proposals by other means.

The most recent congressional reauthorization of the Board suggests that it should play a greater role than it has in recent years. Seeking to maximize the Board's value under this mandate, Park Service and Interior Department officials have reevaluated its desired composition and purpose. They have decided to include higher-profile members who will enable the Board to concentrate on long-term goals and broad strategy as well as operational matters and who will have sufficient prestige and influence to win support for NPS objectives in both the public and the

private sectors. (While the law still requires the Board to recommend the designation of national landmarks, substantive review of landmark nominations would be delegated to committees, as before.) There is every expectation that a prestigious membership focusing on the "big picture" will meet a critical need and well serve the National Park Service and System.

This attention to long-term goals and strategy was perhaps best illustrated a few years ago when Director Robert Stanton charged the Board to take a long-range, scholarly look at the future of the National Park Service and the National Park System and prepare a report with its findings and recommendations. The Board was to consider America's changed landscapes and demographics, emerging technologies, and national priorities affecting the Service and to consider how the Service could offer continued leadership in the national arena.

Under the skilled leadership of its chairman, Dr. John Hope Franklin, the Board spent months carefully studying a variety of critical issues and published its findings in *Rethinking the National Parks in the 21st Century* in 2001. This groundbreaking report written not only for the Director but also for policy-makers in the administration and Congress addressed strategic directions for the Service and the System over the next twenty-five years. More specifically it focused on such diverse issues as preservation and education, deepening cultural associations with traditional and indigenous people with park, recreation, natural resources, changing demographics, environmentally sustainable parks, and the evolution of the National Park System.

In May 2002, Director Fran Mainella asked the Board through its science committee to evaluate the Service's Natural Resource Challenge, a multi-year program to improve the Service's management and preservation of natural resources, and to recommend future directions for science and scientific natural resource management in the parks.

Not only has the Board's advisory role become more important in the past few years, its legislatively mandated role in reviewing and approving national landmark nominations has also become increasingly significant. With the introduction of "Save America's Treasures" and other programs that provide funding for historic preservation, the number of national landmark nominations requiring review has increased. At the same time, maintaining continuity in the Board has become increasingly difficult with half the large turnover in the Board every four years.

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